

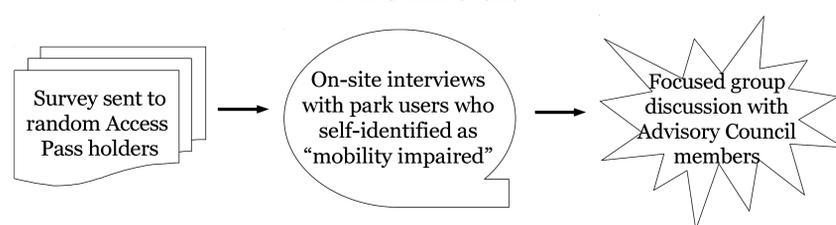
Abstract

Park visitors with mobility impairments are receiving varying levels of accommodation from non-disabled park employees, dependent upon the visibility of their disability. Research has revealed that individuals with more visible disabilities, i.e. individuals who utilize wheelchairs, are more likely to receive accommodation than individuals whose disability is not discernible. Mobility impaired park visitors have commented about upsetting experiences in the parks stemming from negative interactions with park employees who were insensitive to their needs as an individual with a disability, not from lack of accessible features in the parks. How can the parks use this understanding to improve “accessibility for all”?

Introduction

- Are negative experiences of park users who self-identify as “mobility impaired” a result of inaccessible physical features at the parks or insensitive/improperly trained park employees?
- How do non-disabled park employees perceive people with disabilities/mobility impairments?
- How do we use this information to improve “accessibility for all”?

Methods



I conducted interviews with park users who self-identified as mobility impaired, various park employees, Department of Natural Resources accessibility project decision-makers from the engineering department, and the DNR ADA Coordinator: all people who profess their commitment to improving “accessibility for all”.



◀ The researcher with Fred Cowell of the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the chairman of the Maryland DNR Advisory Council on Disability Issues, following a focused group discussion at Tawes Gardens.

Findings

Why do non-disabled people treat people with “hidden” disabilities as inferior to people who use wheelchairs?

- 76% of survey respondents claim to be **SATISFIED PHYSICALLY** with the overall accessibility of features/facilities at Maryland State Parks
- 90% of those interviewed, however, are **UNSATISFIED SOCIALLY**, describing negative experiences with park employees, as a result of their “hidden” disability

What Does Disability Mean?

Non-disabled park and DNR employees tend to associate the term and idea of “disability” with visual cues such as someone who uses a wheelchair. This perception of disability is a **cultural construct** that is being perpetuated by

DNR’s current ideas and policies about accessibility.

But the DNR is not the only entity to employ this understanding of disability. Even by looking at the International Symbol of Access, it becomes clear that our society has made the link: **people with disabilities = people in wheelchairs.** ➤



How Does This Impact Accommodation?

One informant told me bluntly that he feels like he constantly has to prove he is disabled to get authorization to get in and be in the parks (with the Access Pass) because he does not look disabled.

These culturally constructed perceptions and understandings prompt some park employees to be insensitive to and less willing to accommodate the needs of park users whose disabilities are not outwardly apparent. The category of park users with mobility impairments is more complex than just people who use wheelchairs. The greatest barriers to access are often **attitudinal** and stem from prejudicial notions.

Some informants who self-identified as mobility impaired experienced:

- Back Injuries (wore a brace, sometimes used a cane)
- Diabetes (sometimes used a cane)
- Heart Condition (used no adaptive equipment)
- Muscle Weakness (sometimes used a scooter)
- No Kneecaps (used no assistive equipment)

An informant explained that once, while attempting to enter a park using the Access Pass, the gate attendant accused him of stealing the pass, repeatedly demanded to know what, exactly, his disability was, and then claimed he must be faking a disability to manipulate the system, “just because I didn’t look disabled to him, or disabled enough, I guess”.

Application

• **TRAINING** - Being aware of their culturally constructed concept of disability, DNR can provide more extensive and focused training to reorient their employees in regards to how they perceive and accommodate individuals with various types of disability, visible and otherwise.



➤ Can you determine which park user has a disability or self-identifies as mobility impaired?
Group hike at Rocks State Park, MD

• **POLICY** - By recognizing their current focus on providing access for individuals who use wheelchairs, as opposed to access for all, DNR can adapt their policies and decision making process to embrace universal design instead.

• **SOCIETY** - This approach could have a much greater impact on society at large. Promoting an adapted understanding of mobility impairment and disability in general could be further developed into a model for all types of organizations that are struggling with the “disability = wheelchair” model of disability.

Conclusion

This research has shown that:

- The user group of mobility impaired individuals consists of much more than merely people who use a wheelchair.
- Individuals with disabilities who are not immediately recognizable as having a disability are receiving differential treatment, in a negative way.
- Many park employees adhere to a cultural construct of disability that exclusively invokes images of people using wheelchairs, resulting in disrespectful assumptions and misjudgments when faced with individuals who do not fit that model.

By beginning with awareness and education/reeducation, Maryland DNR can help forge a new understanding of mobility impairment and disability and move one step closer to their goal of “accessibility for all”. ➤

